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ABSTRACT

Consultants' goal is to have clients understand and accept their findings and to use them for constructive reform, yet unwelcomed findings may be dismissed, suppressed, or distorted. There are several strategies which consultants can use to communicate unwelcomed findings. The consultant can prepare the groundwork in the original negotiation of the contract to establish honest self-appraisal, and, in order to avoid ethical dilemmas, refuse consultations which are likely to be exercises in flattery or scapegoating. They should also be aware of and reduce their anxieties about giving certain findings and be aware of their own motives for giving either welcomed or unwelcomed findings. The timing of information to clients is important; it is often useful to give informal feedback along the way, and giving too much feedback at one time can overload the client. Too often consultants stop at the analysis of the problem. It is important to move beyond unwelcomed findings to solutions. Ideally, a consultant should put the findings in context, and communicate neutrality toward the findings, but empathy toward the client. These techniques can improve consultants' chances of having unwelcomed findings used for constructive change. (NRB)

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Unwelcomed Findings: Practical and Ethical Dilemmas

Judith S. Blanton, Ph.D.

As a consultant, giving feedback to your client is generally not a problem when the findings are welcome. But what if what you have to say is unwelcome? What if you are asked to evaluate a pet program and find it is ineffective? What if you discover evidence of bias in hiring and promotion that could provide the basis of a lawsuit against your client? What if through your work in team building you find evidence that a favored employee is guilty of sexual harrassment?

In ancient time, the messenger bringing bad news was sometimes killed. In more contemporary times, the consultant who brings unwelcomed findings might find those findings dismissed, supressed or distorted and his or her contract quietly terminated.

Unflattering findings can cost an organization money and might cost employees their jobs. The economic and political consequences of certain findings for the corporation create pressures on the consultant. More subtle pressures to produce findings which are non-threatening and congruent with existing beliefs are also experienced by the consultant. Before examining ways of dealing with these pressures, it is important to clarify the reactions to unwelcomed findings.

Reactions to Unwelcomed findings

The consultant's goal is not to have their clients like their findings. Rather, they hope to have the client understand and accept the findings, and to use them for constructive reform.

Unfortunately this does not always happen. Even findings which are positive or neutral do not always get a full hearing or get used effectively. The reactions to more threatening feedback from consultants may elicit a variety of responses other than those hoped for. These include:

1. Suppression of the report.
2. Personal attacks on the credibility of the consultant.
3. Less personal attacks on the credibility of the report, such as its method, its sample, its generalizability.
4. Direct and indirect pressure to change the findings in a more positive direction.
5. Inability or unwillingness to grasp or respond to problems which are described by the consultant. The mythic character of Cassandra was given the gift of prophecy by the Greek gods but she was simultaneously cursed because her predictions were not believed or heeded. The satisfaction of saying "I told you so" is a hollow one.
6. Scapegoating of an individual or a sub-group within the organization. Blaming a person or sub-group becomes problematic when it keeps the rest of the organization from examining the basic causes of the problem or keeps larger and more necessary changes from being made.

These pressures cannot be completely avoided; however, they can be anticipated and countered. The rest of this paper describes eight recommendations for consultants to assist communicating unwelcomed findings so they can be heard and serve as the basis of constructive action.

Hints in communicating unwelcomed findings

1. Prepare the groundwork in the original negotiation of the contract.

In the original negotiation of a contract, I make three points as clearly as I can.

1) I believe that all organizations have their problems, that new programs in particular can be expected to struggle before they reach optimum organizational effectiveness.
2) I believe that the best way to improve functioning is to have an early warning system about problems before they become critical.
3) I believe that the ability of an organization to cope increases if information (both positive and negative) is used as feedback to determine whether or not change is necessary and, if it is, what kind of change would be most effective. This should be the aim of information gathering rather than merely using information to make judgements, to diagnose pathology or to assign praise or blame.

In general, the clients I work with respond positively to this way of conceptualizing the consulting process. If I do not believe that the organization is at least willing to struggle with the issue of honest self appraisal, then I do not take the contract. A good method of avoiding ethical dilemmas is to refuse consultations which are likely to be exercises in flattery or scapegoating. I do not want to imply that my tone is sanctimonious or that I encourage clients to immediately show their dirty linen as an act of moral courage. My goal is to assist the organization to look at itself in a way that is helpful. To moralize is as unhelpful as to flatter. This leads to my second recommendation.

2. Be aware of and reduce your anxieties about giving welcomed or unwelcomed findings.

A Brisith friend of mine once defined a gentleman as "one who never hurts another's feelings...unintentionally." I think this is a good goal for a consultant as well. If unwelcomed findings are given, this should never be unintentional. In addition, the consultant should be self assured enough and independent enough that he or she does not have to please. Able to please, yes, have to please, no. Most of us do not enjoy giving bad news. That is healthy. Yet, if giving unwelcomed findings is personally disturbing, the client's negative reactions are likely to be exacerbated. A consultant must get rid of his or her personal anxiety about giving negative feedback. If the feedback upsets you, how can you expect the organization to respond constructively?

3. Be aware of your motives for giving welcomed or unwelcomed findings.

Your work with the organization should certainly meet your needs: financial needs, needs for understanding and creativity, needs to be of help, etc. Problems can arise, however, when the consultant's unconscious

needs interfere with these conscious needs. Let me give an example in which I believe a consultant's need to be right interfered with his responsibility to be helpful, and his identification with a person within the organization distorted his assessment of the larger situation. I frequently involve a graduate student intern in my consultations. After a short series of contacts with the client organization, one student decided that he knew what was wrong with the organization and confided that he was amazed at how the management could make such stupid and unjust mistakes. He felt condescending toward the organizational management and grandiose about his ability to straighten things out. In addition, he began to see the upper management of the organization as a villain and a lower staff member as a victim. He felt very involved in their conflict and said he felt ethically compelled to expose the situation immediately. My own analysis of the situation was that he was over-identified with the "victimized" staff member, that his stance of moral superiority had more to do with his own self image than with an accurate assessment of the complexities of the situation. Finally, the recommendation for an expose might meet his needs but would not help the situation for the staff member or for the organization as a whole. Indeed, such a stance would very likely polarize the situation and make it much worse. After sorting through his own issues about organizational exploitation, the complexity of pressures which affected the so-called "villainous behavior" of the upper management, his urgency for the expose lessened. We developed instead a longer term strategy which focused on improving management-staff relations without blaming any particular individuals for past behaviors.

In another example, a student intern working on an evaluation of a specific career development program did a number of interviews with female employees of a large corporation. In these interviews, a number of women volunteered information about experiences of sexism and sexual harrassment they had experienced. Although this issue was outside of the scope of the original contract, we were faced with an ethical dilemma: did we have an ethical duty to make some intervention? Luckily, all the serious incidents had been reported. If they had not, I believe it was incumbent on us to recommend that the women file a grievance or at least report the incident to the Industrial Relations department. The unreported incidents were not severe but they did indicate a general and pervasive climate of sexism. The intern and I discussed how to communicate this information. She was legitimately incensed by the behavior and wanted to use the report on career development as a vehicle for exposing this situation. Within the past year, the organization had formally reprimanded several male employees for their sexual harrassment and had issued formal warnings against specific types of sexist behavior. My conversations with staff of the Industrial Relations department indicated that they were aware of and concerned about the issue. I ruled against a sensationalistic presentation of the problem. Again, I thought such an approach had more to do with the personal needs of the student than with an effective strategy for change. On the other hand, the pervasive climate of sexism did have important implications for the career development program. We decided to discuss the issue in that context. Our final report and recommendations stressed the need to make changes in the organizational climate rather than focus entirely on the skills of women employees. We recommended strategies

that focused on the attitudes and behavior of the men, particularly male supervisors, within the organization. Had we used the more sensational approach, I believe we would have been seen as troublemakers who were addressing concerns out of the scope of our work. This would have elicited a rejection of the rest of the report findings and a defensive rather than problem-solving stance. Sometimes, of course, an expose is needed. But we need to be constantly questioning our motives. Are we keeping quiet or moderating our findings because we are afraid of losing our contract? Or do our personal motives lead us to polarizing a situation in a way that will actually hinder change? There are no easy answers, only the necessity to be as attentive to our own motives as we are to those of our clients.

4. Watch your timing.

As a consultant, you must tread the path between giving information that is incomplete and premature and giving complete information that arrives too late to be useful. My suggestion is to give informal feedback along the way. This is best done in face-to-face contact rather than through written memos or reports. Frequent, early feedback can catch problems before they are crises. In addition, giving multiple, periodic feedback can reduce the affective charge when any single piece is negative. One of the reasons why they Olympics are so important is that there is only one chance to win or lose...so much rides on this one chance. This makes for exciting sports but is a poor strategy for constructive organizational assessment and change.

If the unwelcomed findings appear to spring from out of the blue, resistance can be compounded by embarrassment. In one consultation, my colleague and I noted a number of severe problems in the administration

of a specific program. Before we made our report to the larger government agency in which this administrative unit worked, we met with the administrators and discussed our findings with them in a matter-of-fact manner. We told them we wanted them to know of our findings as we knew they were very committed to having the program work. We also provided them with the date by which the final draft would be completed and said we would be willing to include a statement about any current work to correct the problems we had noted. We described a number of recommendations that we would be making to improve matters and acknowledged that many of these suggestions had come from their staff. After the administrative group had time to consider the recommendations, they decided to implement several of them immediately. We modified the final report so that in addition to pointing out the administrative problems, the group was commended on its efforts to correct them. Specific steps which had already been taken were reported and therefore were included as their accomplishments rather than our recommendations. Our report focused on the next steps to be taken. By reporting the administration's commitment to these tasks, the likelihood of their energetic implementation was increased. The timing of our feedback provided an impetus and an opportunity for change. Our goal was not embarrassment of the sub group nor demonstrating our diagnostic skill; it was to communicate the message that mistakes had been made and change was necessary. Using early feedback as a change tool lessened embarrassment and chaneled efforts into change rather than into defensiveness.

5. Move beyond unwelcomed findings to solutions.

The case mentioned perviously also illustrates the need to move beyond diagnosis to action. Too often consultants stop at the analysis of the

problem. This is an important, a necessary, but not a sufficient step. If the client sees no alternative behavior, he or she must defend present behavior. Too often consultants with unwelcomed findings find the focus shifting to arguments around the fine points of the diagnosis. Actually, you do not need the client to agree with all the details of the diagnosis. Its use is to explain the need to change and to aid in developing alternative strategies for change.

6. Communicate neutrality with regard to the findings but empathy toward the client's goals

Ideally a consultant should be supportive of the overall goals of the client organization. Yet the consultant must have neutrality toward the various methods the organization uses to accomplish these goals. Although findings may be unwelcomed in that they criticize existing methods, they can be seen as very welcomed if they can assist in reaching the larger goals more effectively. If you can get the client organization to see the findings in this light, there will be much less resistance to critical findings. Only a very neurotic tennis player gets angry at a coach who tells her how to move her grip to improve her backhand. The coach and the player have a joint interest in the improvement of her game. This is a good analogy for a consultant and client.

7. Put findings in context

Organizations always have problems, there are just higher and lower problems. (Maslow called them gripes and meta-gripes.) When you give unwelcomed findings, it is good to acknowledge this. Just because mistakes are made or problems arise, it is not always someone's fault. Sometimes thoughtful judgements are made but problems are underestimated or resources overestimated or other factors intervene. The organization needs to

anticipate unforseen problems and be able to risk making mistakes or run the risk of stagnation. Another example can be given here. In the consultation about career development for women in a large corporation, our interviews indicated that many women attended lunchtime presentations held by the corporation, not because of personal interest but because they thought that their attendance would be recognized and might assist them obtain a promotion. We mentioned this finding in an interim report. This came as a surprise to those running the groups and the head of the Industrial Relations division who ran the seminars expressed concern that upper management might believe that this assumption was "somehow" encouraged by the division. There was obvious anxiety about us mentioning what we thought was an interesting and useful finding. The solution was to place the finding in context. We added a few sentences that indicated that none of the literature or advertisements for the seminars in any way suggested that this was a stepping stone to a promotion. Furthermore, we noted the need to understand how such a misunderstanding could arise. We speculated that it might be an indication of the eagerness for women to move up in the organization and a reflection of their ignorance about how to do so. We were able to move the focus from locating who was to "blame" for the misunderstanding to seeing it as a symptom of a systemic problem. Putting the finding in context made all the difference.

It is also important to acknowledge the strengths of the individual or organization, not just its weaknesses. Too often, strengths are expected and it is only weaknesses that are noted. Even if a specific goal is not accomplished, rewarding progress toward that goal can reinforce those activities and encourage further progress.

8. Learn when enough is enough and too much is an overload

Research has indicated that individuals given negative feedback have difficulty recalling the content of the message but do remember affect and tone. If you can see that the findings are so unwelcomed that they can not easily be assimilated, make your point and then stop. It might be useful to schedule another meeting to go into the details only after there has been time for the person to assimilate the general point. The ability of a person to absorb praise is amazing, but our ability to absorb unwelcomed information or personal criticism is quite limited.

When you give very unwelcomed findings and find that someone takes it very well, it may well be that the person did not really grasp the implications of what was said. Again, we must negotiate that line between communicating too little (so denial is possible) and communicating too much (so the hearer is overwhelmed.) More secure individuals can be given more information. With more strongly defended individuals, you may need to take more time and spell out the implication of the findings as well as the findings themselves.

In conclusion, it is unlikely that we can make unwelcomed findings welcome. We can, however, improve our abilities to have them used for constructive change. Good luck.